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SUBJECT Alleged Operation that went Awry

CHARLES GIBSON: There is a report today of a CIA covert operation that went awry. The Washington Post reports that the Reagan Administration, with the President's personal approval, authorized an anti-terrorist operation in the Middle East. But one of the members of a group that was being trained to preemptively strike against terrorists apparently went off and planned an attack on his own that led to an unauthorized bombing in Beirut.

Jeane Meserve has details.

JEANE MESERVE: Eighty people were killed, 200 injured when a car bomb exploded in a Beirut suburb on March 8th. The apparent target of the attack was a Shiite Moslem leader linked to the bombings of the American Maine compound and the U.S. Embassy Annex in Beirut. But he escaped unharmed.

The Washington Post reports today that the bombing was the work of a Lebanese counter-terrorist group trained and supported by the CIA, but that this mission was carried out without CIA approval or knowledge.

As a result of the botched bombing, covert support for the Lebanese anti-terrorist unit and several others was discontinued.

Secretary of State Shultz, traveling in the Middle East, did not refute the report.

SECRETARY OF STATE GEORGE SHULTZ: Our view about terrorism is well known. And I also have the view that at this stage actions will speak a lot louder than words.

MESERVE: The Reagan Administration has spoken frequently and strongly about the need to stop terrorists.

PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN: In dealing with terrorists, yes, we want to retaliate, but only if we can put our finger on the people responsible.

MESERVE: But today's news brought negative reaction from the Vice Chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, who called the episode an embarrassment.

SENATOR PATRICK LEAHY: There is nothing that is going to deter terrorists if they see us kind of bungling around.

MESERVE: There are questions as to the legality of the operation. U.S. law prohibits American involvement in assassinations. But was this an assassination attempt or a preemptive strike against terrorists? The State Department refused direct comment, but said, "We do not undertake any actions which are inconsistent with the law."

The bungling of the Beirut operation has apparently not affected congressional support for anti-terrorist actions.

REP. RICHARD CHENEY: I think we have to be prepared, having developed that intelligence, to act upon it.

MESERVE: The CIA never briefed the full Intelligence Committees of the House and Senate, and that has upset some members who, although committed to stopping terrorism, are equally committed to seeing that the CIA does not overstep its bounds.